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Parent's Guide to Child Abduction

Missing Children

Each year in the United States, between 1.3 and 1.8 million children are reported missing. These children may be kidnapped, lost, or runaways. Some are taken by a noncustodial parent. Still others disappear with few clues as to the reason.

In many cases, an abductor is not a stranger to the child. So, while the warning to "stay away from strangers" is good advice, it provides very limited protection. Children are more often abducted or exploited by people who have some type of familiarity with them, but who may not be known to the parents. The term "stranger" misleads children into believing that they should only be aware of individuals who have an unusual or slovenly appearance. Instead, it is more appropriate to teach children to watch out for certain situations or actions, rather than certain kinds of individuals.

Preventing Child Abduction

There are steps you can take to minimize the chances of your child being abducted. Experts recommend that you teach your child the following:

- Her full name, address, including city, state and zip code; phone number, including area code; parents' names, work addresses, and phone numbers.
- How to use both a push button and rotary-dial telephone.

- How to make an emergency call to you or for help from a pay phone.
- How to make a long distance call (both directly to you using the area code, and by dialing "0" for the operator).
- Never tell anyone over the phone that she is home alone, and NEVER open the door to strangers when she is home alone.
- Never to go into anyone's home without your permission. Children should learn whose homes they are allowed to enter.
- Never to look for you if she becomes separated from you while shopping or in a public place. Instead, to go to the nearest checkout counter, security office, or lost and found, and tell the person in charge that she has lost his mom or dad and needs help in finding them. And, she should **never** go to a parking lot without you.
- To walk and play with others and to use the buddy system. If your child walks to school, have her walk with other children. A child is most vulnerable when alone.
- That adults do not usually ask children for directions or help, but should be asking other adults. If someone in a car should stop to ask for directions, they should not go near the car.
- That if someone is following her on foot or in a car, to go to a place where there are other people--to a neighbor's home or into a store, for instance--and ask for help. She should not go near the car to talk to anyone inside and should not try to hide behind bushes.
- That no one should ask her to look for a "lost puppy" or tell her that either of her parents is in trouble and that he will take her to mom or dad.
- To never go near a car with someone in it or to get into a car without your permission. Your child should learn in whose car he is allowed to ride. Warn your child that someone might try to lure him into a car by claiming you said to pick him up; tell him never to obey such instructions. Instead, he should go back to the school for help. Share a code word with your child known only among family members. Stress to your child that anyone offering a ride unexpectedly--even a family friend--will have been given the code word in advance.
- Never to tell anyone over the phone that she is home alone.
- Never to answer the door when home alone. Remind your child to talk through a door or window to anyone delivering a package, and to tell the person to leave the package at the door. Teach your child how to call your community's emergency assistance number (often 911). Make sure he knows a neighbor to call if someone tries to get into the house or if there is any kind of emergency.

- To tell you if any adult asks her to keep a "secret."
- To tell you if someone offers him gifts, money, drugs, or wants to take his picture.
- That no one should touch her in any part of her body covered by a bathing suit. She should not touch anyone in those areas either. Explain to her that the body is special and private.
- To yell, "This is not my parent!" if someone tries to take her away.
- To ask your permission to leave the yard or to go to a neighbor's house. Older children should phone home to tell you where they are, especially if they change locations.
- To never hitch hike or get a ride with anyone, unless you have told him it is okay to accept the ride.
- To come home before dark.
- To avoid dark or abandoned places.
- To avoid adults who are waiting around a playground--particularly an adult who wants to play with them and their friends.
- To ask anyone who drives him anywhere, not to leave him alone in the car--but if he is alone in a car, to put up the windows, leaving a "finger" space between the window glass and the rim, and to lock the doors and stay near the car horn. If a stranger approaches the car, he should blow the horn until help arrives.
- That she has the right to say NO to anyone who tries to take her somewhere, touches her, or makes her feel uncomfortable in any way.

What You Should Know as a Parent

Parents can also take other steps to prevent abductions and to assist the police and others in locating a missing child:

- Never leave a child unattended; **never** leave a child alone in a car.
- Know your child's friends and their parents. Be involved in your child's activities.
- Listen when your child tells you he or she does not want to be with someone; there may be a reason you should know about.

- Notice when someone shows your child a great deal of attention and find out why.
- Be sensitive to changes in your child's behavior or attitudes.
- Encourage open communication. Never belittle any fear or concern your child may express to you.
- Keep a complete description of your child, including hair and eye color, height, weight, date of birth, and other identifying characteristics (such as glasses, braces, pierced ears, birth marks).
- Take a photograph of your child every six months (four times a year for children under age two). Head-and-shoulder portraits taken from different angles (like school pictures) are preferable.
- Know where your child's medical records are located (and learn how to access them should the need arise). These records could contain valuable information to help identify your child.
- Make sure your dentist keeps up-to-date dental records of your child. If you move, get a copy of your child's dental records.
- Have your child's fingerprints taken by your local police department. Do not attempt to make these prints yourself; police are *trained* to do this. They will give you the fingerprint card but will not keep a record of it. Keep in mind that fingerprinting is not a primary tool when searching for and identifying missing children. However, if the child is too young or can't identify him or herself, prints can confirm identity.
- Have a set plan outlining what your child should do if you become separated while away from home.
- Do not buy items that have your child's name on them such as a hat, jackets, and T-shirts. It is an easy way for an abductor to learn your child's name and start up a friendly conversation.
- Make a game of reading license plate numbers. By learning the various numbers and state colors your child will be able to recognize license plates.
- Be sure their day care center or school will not release children to anyone but their parents or someone designated by their parents. Instruct the school to call you if your child is absent.
- The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) recommends that children not take self-defense training (such as the martial arts) for the sole purpose of thwarting an abduction. Young children, in particular, should not attempt to defend themselves in this manner. However, the martial arts, or other

methods of self-defense, can help a child develop self-confidence and athletic ability.

- Be leery of gadgets and gimmicks that purport to protect your child.

What to Do if Your Child Is Missing

Below are recommendations from The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the National Crime Prevention Council on steps to take in the event a child is missing.

- Act *immediately*. Search your house thoroughly, including closets, piles of laundry, in and under beds, old, stored, refrigerators, or wherever a child might hide, fall asleep, or get trapped.
- If you still haven't found your child, think where he or she could have gone. Check with your neighbors, your child's friends and school; if you are divorced, call your ex-spouse.
- If you still haven't found your child, call the police and start procedures immediately. Provide as much precise information as possible, including the clothing your child was wearing when he or she disappeared. If your child is under 13 years of age, is mentally incapacitated, or drug dependent, police response may be expedited.
- Make sure the police put information about your child into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Persons File to ensure that any law enforcement agency in the country will be able to identify your child. If your local police refuse to do this, the FBI will enter your child's name into the NCIC computer. There is no waiting period for entering a child's information and this entry will not give your child a police record.
- After you have notified your local police, also call The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's toll-free hotline to report your child missing. One of their technical advisors may be able to follow up with you and the police department during the investigation. Call 800-843-5678; TDD Hotline (for the hearing impaired), 800-826-7653. These numbers are also for use by any person who has information on a missing child.

- Look for clues at home that may help you to find your child. Check your child's room for notes, letters, or missing clothing. Check your telephone bill: Are there any unfamiliar long-distance calls that may indicate where your child might have gone- Request duplicate bills if necessary.
- Look for clues in your neighborhood. Ask the postal carrier, local storekeepers, building employees, and anyone who might have been on the street and seen your child; check arcades and "hangouts;" inform area hospitals, drug-treatment centers and children's shelters that you are looking for a missing child.
- Look for clues at your child's school. Speak to teachers, the principal, the guidance counselor; talk to your child's friends and enlist their help.
- Check out all areas of your child's life: adults, peers, clubs, your church or synagogue. Talk to any adult your child might have looked up to. Explore any interests or activities that your child pursued that would introduce him or her to new people. Tell everyone and anyone that your child is missing and ask for their help.
- Canvass distant friends and relatives to whom your child might have gone.
- In urban areas, have searches made of locked or generally inaccessible areas, such as roofs, basements, and garages.
- Alert the police of any bus and train terminals, airports, any parkways, and national parks near your home, particularly if your child might try to reach a divorced parent, camp friend, or favorite vacation area.
- If there had been tension between you and your child, tell friends, neighbors, relatives, and authorities who may speak to him, to convey a message of love, and that you only want him to return home safely.
- If your child calls, communicate love and concern for her safety--not fear, and not anger about the past.
- Publicize your child's disappearance: make flyers with the child's recent, clear photograph attached, along with a description that includes sex, age, height, weight, eye and hair color, any identifying marks or scars, and details of clothing and jewelry when last seen. At the top of the flyers should be the heading "Missing" or "Have You Seen This Child-" in bold letters. Give the name and phone number of a law enforcement office that can receive calls around the clock. Post these flyers in store windows, at shopping malls--anywhere you can. Enlist the support of local newspapers and television stations, and drop off or mail flyers to all area hospitals and other treatment centers.
- If you employ a private investigator, get references and check them carefully. Call your state's licensing bureau, the Better Business Bureau, and your local or state consumer protection agency regarding the investigator's standing.

- One video tape on preventing child abuse which you may want to rent or buy is "Strong Kids, Safe Kids." This tape is available at some video rental stores and libraries. There may be other tapes you might want to view with your child to explore these sensitive topics; we recommend previewing any tape before watching it with your child to determine if it is age appropriate.